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Awareness and Application of Differentiated Instruction in the Elementary Classroom Action Research Assignment at a Suburban St. Paul, Minnesota School

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Awareness and Application of Differentiated Instruction in the Elementary Classroom

Action Research Assignment at a Suburban St. Paul, Minnesota School

Tammi Sue Nelson

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts in Education

AUGSBURG COLLEGE
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

2007

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MASTERS OF ARTS IN EDUCATION
AUGSBURG COLLEGE
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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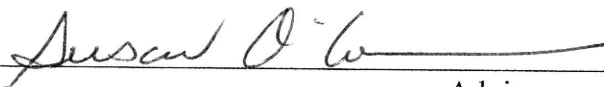
Tammi Sue Nelson

Has been approved by the Review Committee and fulfills the requirements for the Master of Arts in Education Degree.

Date of Symposium: _____

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Committee:



Advisor



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ABSTRACT

Awareness and Application of Differentiated Instruction in the Elementary Classroom A Case Study of a Suburban School

Tammi Sue Nelson

March, 2007

- _____ Leadership Application Project (EDC 585)
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Differentiated instruction is an educational approach that provides instructional strategies to accommodate students based upon their individual learning needs. In traditional classroom settings, many teachers focus on the needs of their classroom as a whole and often lose sight of the individual students. Students who differ from the norm present in their classrooms often struggle as the instruction does not accommodate their learning style, cultural background or possibly other variables. This research examined classrooms and the use of differentiated instruction. The focus was primarily on the classroom instructors' awareness of differentiated instruction and their ability to incorporate differentiated instruction through grouping strategies, physical dynamics of the classroom, integration of differentiated instruction into the curriculum, and teacher student relationships.

Through this study the primary findings were that although the elementary classroom teachers in this case study were familiar with differentiated instruction, the incorporation of these strategies were limited. Throughout this study it was evident that classroom teachers have encountered various barriers such as time constraints, lack of training, deficient funding and lack of resources. Various sources of literature were used as reference points. The work of Carol Ann Tomlinson provided a plethora of beneficial information to assist during this study.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Beth's Story

Beth had made the decision to become a teacher at the early age of 14. During her 8th grade year she experienced a math teacher that brought the subject to life for her. This teacher provided new and insightful ways to learn math and Beth became inspired by her teacher's ability to make it interesting. Beth's 8th grade algebra class was continuously bubbling with activity as students used various methods to approach the same problems. Students had opportunities to work independently or in large or small groups. This particular math teacher provided a plethora of choices for students in the classroom to achieve the same goals. As Beth progressed into junior high and then through high school, she did not meet up with another teacher that provided the same type of instruction that the awe inspiring 8th grade algebra teacher had done. Although most of Beth's teachers did not offer the same array of assignments, Beth continued to draw upon the lessons that her algebra teacher had provided and applied it not only to her other math classes, but used these strategies throughout her different courses such as language arts, science and historical studies.

Graduating from high school, Beth selected a college that was known for their teacher education program. Brimming with excitement to make a difference in the lives of children, Beth decided upon an elementary education certification. She entered each course with fresh enthusiasm and found that many of the methods used by her 8th grade algebra teacher were part of an instructional approach known as differentiated instruction. Throughout Beth's college coursework in her educational degree program, she encountered professors who served a buffet of strategies for the education students to

partake. The professor's concentrated on developing skills in their students that they could pack into their educational suitcase and use the classroom. These skills centered on being an effective teacher to all students in the classroom. This along with classroom management and curriculum development were key elements in Beth's education program.

As Beth closed in on her goal of becoming a classroom teacher, her education migrated from the college classroom into the elementary classroom first to complete her observation hours. Her eyes widened as she watched the classroom teachers provide lessons that seemed to flow from their mouths directly into the minds of the students. She was amazed at the management of centers and various activities students were participating in. As she watched she also wondered, "How can I walk into a classroom and do what they are doing and do it as well as they do?" The intimidation factor began to creep into Beth's mind and as she approached her student teaching assignment, her focus shifted.

As she stepped into the classroom on the first day of student teaching, Beth also realized that she was taking a step into changing lives of children. She will always remember the first time she encountered the smell of freshly sharpened pencils, sweaty sneakers running into the room after gym class and the toasty aroma of chicken nuggets at noon time. As these new smells began to fade, the first few weeks were filled with hours of observing the teacher and becoming familiar with the classroom routine. She noticed that absent from the class was the array of activities she had been exposed to during her 8th grade algebra class and then formally during her teacher education program. She was puzzled as to why this element of difference was unaccounted for. As

the first few weeks passed she shifted from being the observer to being the observed. Teaching reading, writing and math were the main objectives for this young service learning teacher. She was inundated with correcting, parent communication and staff requirements such as meetings and bus and lunch duty. Time seemed to be something that was a rare commodity and planning was something that happened at 2:00 a.m. after the daily correcting was completed. During those early hours in the morning is when it became clear to Beth. The balancing act of teaching is a talent that is not easily mastered. Balancing the standards requirements, lesson planning, administrative responsibilities, and other obligations is a talent that is fostered over years of experience. For first year teachers, as well as veteran teachers, there are many obstacles to overcome. Beth focused on using her time with her cooperating teacher to reflect on the lessons that she instructed. Through the experiences that she had during her service learning and the opportunity to reflect upon those experiences, Beth realized that she was beginning to build a foundation of experience. Building upon these experiences, she could gradually implement differentiation in her lessons. Differentiated teaching strategies evolve into lessons as teachers gain more experience.

Differentiated Instruction and Beginning Teachers

Through college coursework we learn to instruct to the students needs. We study learning styles and focus on lessons that provide opportunities for all students to be able to learn at their level. Differentiated instruction, a hot topic in educational trends, is one way educators are taught how to address the needs of students. According to Carol Ann Tomlinson (2003), differentiated instruction is when:

Teachers proactively plan varied approaches to what students need to learn, how they will learn it, and/or how they can express what they have learned in order to increase the likelihood that each student will learn as much as he or she can as efficiently as possible (p. 151).

Carol Ann Tomlinson and Janis Jarvis (2006) outline a theory in which the classroom teacher must break away from the standard curriculum and take the time to evaluate students personally to create a balanced instructional approach. This is evident in the following statement found in their article *Teaching Beyond the Book* (2006):

When we lift our eyes from the pacing guide long enough to observe the individuals in our classroom, they will often teach us exactly what nourishment they need to thrive. Good teaching is inevitably the fine art of connecting content and kids – of doing what it takes to adapt how we teach so that what we teach takes hold in the lives and minds of students (p. 17).

Through Beth's journey of the realization of her desire to become a teacher to the reality of being the classroom teacher, she traveled from the idealism of what every classroom should look like and be, to the actuality of what the classroom is. Many novice teachers encounter this same experience from emerging from the cocoon of the college classroom, and into the world being a professional teacher. Ideally education

professors model differentiation to show how it should look and feel in a classroom.

When new teachers develop, they often have the ideology that is what their classrooms must be. However, it takes years of feedback, coaching and reflection for differentiation to develop. Novice teachers must have perseverance to continually evolve their methods into what they have observed and to what they strive to be.

Entering the realm of the teaching profession is especially daunting during these times of educational turmoil. No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Q-Comp, Annual Yearly Progress, and standardized testing requirements open the flood gates of instruction and overwhelm teachers time and resources. The ability to be creative and provide meaningful lessons to students becomes watered down with other measurable requirements placed upon teachers by their national and state governments as well as district administration. Teachers are receiving mixed messages as they migrate from the college classroom into the world of becoming a professional educator.

Recent trends in education incorporate teaching strategies that blend student backgrounds with traditional teaching techniques. It is the teacher's responsibility to recognize the student's backgrounds in order to make learning meaningful to students. However, when faced with the national requirements and state standards, teachers are often unable to incorporate this method of instruction. In addition to the hurdles presented by the national and state requirements, teachers often may have conflicting cultural views or biases that are brought into the classroom and unknowingly come through during student instruction. Because of administrative requirements and conflicting ideals, many teachers focus on the standard curriculum and do not deviate from it for fear that they will discriminate against a particular student group.

Research Question:

The fundamental purpose of this study is to answer several questions. The questions at the forefront of this study are:

- ♦ Is differentiated instruction beneficial to elementary students?
- ♦ Is differentiated instruction common place in the elementary classroom?
- ♦ What are some of the elements of differentiated instruction?
- ♦ What are some common reasons why teachers do not use differentiated instruction?

Best practices in the classroom setting are continually evolving. The face of the typical American classroom has drastically changed over the last several years. Schools are focused on meeting the standards and providing an education to keep our nation competitive with the global environment. Student test scores are displaying variances that indicate a need for change. The teacher attrition rate in our nation is at an all time high. Fifty-percent of teachers entering the profession quit within the first five years of their teaching career. All of these facts leave us with more questions regarding the future of our students, our country and our world.

This research will explore the history of differentiated instruction, differentiated instructional strategies, the benefits of differentiated instruction, are differentiated instructional strategies being implemented in classrooms, and barriers to implementing differentiated instruction. The action research will bring to light the full landscape of differentiated instruction and how it is used or not used in the typical elementary classroom. The case study features a suburban school and the use of differentiated instruction by the classroom teachers.

Terminology

There are key terms directly associated with differentiated instruction that will be used throughout the research. The terms are used in the context of the educational realm and will be defined as such.

The key concept of the research is differentiated instruction. This strategic teaching methodology considers each student and provides learning options for students. These learning options include choices for students such as but not limited to; grouping strategies, and learning contracts. Differentiated instruction is viewed as an educational best-practice. A pioneer of differentiated instruction, Carol Ann Tomlinson is considered one of the foremost experts in the field. The definition she gives to explain this strategy is (2003):

On a simple level, differentiated instruction is teaching with student variance in mind. It means starting where the kids are rather than adopting a standardized approach to teaching that seems to presume that all learners of a given age or grade are essentially alike. Thus differentiated instruction is “responsive” teaching rather than “one-size-fits-all” teaching (p. 151).

Along with the catch phrase “differentiated instruction” other key terms will be used throughout this proposal. The first is flexible grouping. Flexible grouping is an important part of differentiated instruction. Flexible grouping encompasses various strategies to group students. Flexible grouping refers to placing students in large groups,

small groups, teams, partners, and individuals. Flexible grouping as defined by Radencich and McKay (1995):

Grouping that is not static, where members of the reading group change frequently (p. 11).

As indicated in the definition supplied by Radencich and McKay, flexible grouping is most commonly used during reading instruction. While one grouping strategy is not preferred over the other, it is the needs of the individual student that will drive the grouping placement. Teachers consider the strengths and weaknesses of their students while determining group placement. Flexible grouping addresses that grouping patterns may change over time and may revolve around a particular task or assignment. The individual student outcome determines future grouping strategies.

There are three different flexible grouping patterns. These are:

- Students working independently
- Small Groups
- Large groups

Independence as defined by Miriam-Websters On-Line Dictionary is:

Freedom from the control, influence, support, aid, or the like, of others.

When the option of independent work is given to students, students are able to work at their pace focusing on mastering a learning objective provided to them. Students may

work under a learning contract in order to track their progress and for assessment purposes.

Small group is another flexible grouping option. Small groups are an opportunity for students to work in groups of four to six students. These groups also have different options in regards to how the grouping occurs. Grouping may be decided by the teacher (teacher choice), by the students (student choice), readiness (or ability), heterogeneous grouping (by gender), or by topic (Radencich, M. C., L. J. McKay, and J. R. Paratore, 2005).

Large group commonly is referred to as whole class instruction. During this grouping technique all students are instructed using the same curriculum and provided the same lesson. Often this type of instruction may be to introduce vocabulary, discussing prior knowledge, setting a purpose, and making predictions. Whole group instruction also provides the opportunity to build community as a classroom while sharing a common experience.

Compacting is another key term found in the world of differentiated instruction. Compacting is a form of pre-assessment of a student's understanding of the lesson content. Through compacting a classroom teacher uses documentation in three stages. First the teacher assesses the student's current knowledge about the content. Next the teacher determines what information the student does not know. Finally a learning plan is developed for the student documenting how the student will use their time to fill in the learning gaps and use prior knowledge to understand the current lesson content (Tomlinson, 1999).

The idea of learning contracts is introduced through differentiated instruction. Learning contracts are an agreement that is conferred upon between the student and the teacher. This provides the opportunity for the student to learn at a pace that is appropriate for them. For a learning contract to be successful, the teacher is fully responsible to identify the skills the student is to learn. The student needs to have some level of independency while working towards learning the skill. The contract specifies which skills the student must be mastered by the student. Consequences for not fulfilling the contract are outlined as well as reinforcements for the student when they reach benchmarks. Like any formal contract, the teacher and student sign the agreement.

Research has been conducted encompassing these key differentiated instruction terms. As the research unfolds through this paper the fundamental thoughts on the benefits to differentiated instruction will emerge as well as the common themes evident from interviews conducted and elementary students observed.

CHAPTER 2

Review of the Literature

Differentiated instruction has been a highly discussed educational topic over the last several years. Because of this there is a plethora of research that has been conducted on the subject. A pioneer of the concept of differentiated instruction, Carol Ann Tomlinson is considered one of the foremost experts in the field. One explanation she provides towards the understanding of what differentiated instruction is:

To differentiate instruction is to recognize students varying background knowledge, readiness, language, preferences in learning, interests, and to react responsively. Differentiated instruction is a process to approach teaching and learning for students of differing abilities in the same class. The intent of differentiating instruction is to maximize each student's growth and individual success by meeting each student where he or she is, and assisting in the learning process (2003) .

Starting where the students are provides educators with a foundation to build upon. Leaning upon this foundation, teachers step away from the prepared standard curriculum maps and take inventory of their students learning abilities and styles annually. Differentiation puts the teacher in the role of a director who facilitates learning, rather than commanding it. This allows more student involvement which leads to student engagement. As I read through the literature on differentiated instruction, I placed myself

in this role not only in theory but in practice. It is a constant struggle of mine as well as other educators to meet the needs of students while meeting the additional demands of the profession.

The literature review focused on seven areas: the history of differentiated instruction, differentiated instructional strategies, adhering to the curriculum and standards, differentiated instruction and cultural awareness and competence, differentiated instruction and funding needs, and understanding the students. The researcher considered the relationship to the subject matter when selecting these areas for the review of literature. Also, the researcher selected these areas to offer the reader a deeper understanding on these perspectives related to differentiated instructional strategies awareness and application in classrooms.

History of Differentiated Instruction

The concept of differentiated instruction is deeply rooted back to the birth of education in the United States. From the onset of educational practices in the colonial United States to the present day system, the fundamental purpose of education was to meet the needs of students. In 1638 it was documented that the Puritans recognized communication differences in students. The Puritans focused on various methods of communication in order to instruct their children to read. The primary vision of the Puritans was for students to be able to read for religious purposes. Puritans focused on the education of their children while others during this time period were obsessed with trail blazing and finding new land.

The dame school provided education to students through a setting currently referred to as day care. Parents would leave their children with a neighborhood lady or dame, to learn. The dame would use everyday tasks to assist in the lessons. In modern society we would recognize many of these tasks incorporated into the learning day as differentiated strategies. Students would learn through various activities about reading, writing, science and math through the use of common day chores such as sewing.

While one may find evidence of differentiated practices leading back to the Puritan and Dame school days, differentiated in the contemporary view is a combination of many theories as well as practices from the beginning of education to present day. The guidelines to differentiated instruction are based on student readiness. Student readiness means that when instructing particular skills to students, they should be slightly higher than their current level of understanding.

A focus on individualized instruction emerged in the 1970s. This individualized instructional model focused on student learning at their own ability level and the setting of individual goals. This model allowed students to study at their own pace. Lessons also were molded to fit the student's individual learning style. The learning material was segmented and taught at a student directed pace. Because each student took ownership of their work, the use of whole class instruction and group interaction was sacrificed (Betrus, 1995). This was the onset of what we currently understand as differentiated instruction. The individual instructional model melted into the use of different objectives, methods of learning, pacing and materials for each student (Kitao, 1994).

Lev Vygotsky coined the term "Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)" (1978) in classifying the teaching zone to which teachers should target. This is the spectrum in

which learning occurs for an individual. Beginning with Vygotsky the current understanding of what differentiated instruction is began. In the early 1980's Kurt Fisher provided research that supported the ZPD ideology. These studies provided the pathway for future leaders in differentiated instruction to travel. In 1994 the team of Ellis and Worthington endorsed these ideas through the research of effective management of classroom instruction, the use of grouping strategies, and activating students' prior knowledge.

Currently a common thread intertwined in the realm of differentiated instruction is Carol Ann Tomlinson. Tomlinson has conducted research to support the findings that engaging students through the use of various learning strategies facilitates optimal student learning. Tomlinson has provided much evidence where she has found the positive effects of differentiated instruction.

Differentiated Instruction Grouping Strategies

There are many misunderstandings regarding differentiated instruction. One of the most common misconceptions is that differentiation is providing individual activities for individual students. Differentiated instruction uses various techniques in large groups, small groups and at times independent learning activities. Teachers do not need to create individual activities for each student. This idea is intimidating and unrealistic. The concept of individualized instruction detracts from the luster of differentiated instruction and often causes teachers to dismiss it. All students are presented the key concepts but at different complexities. When the concept is embraced, teachers learn the importance of students having opportunities to work together in large and small groups as well as work

alone (Keck & Kinney, 2005). To facilitate this, teachers must provide instructional activities that are centralized around the students' abilities. With an understanding of the students' strengths and weaknesses teachers can scaffold lessons building upon what students know (Hall, Strangman & Meyer, 2003).

Flexible grouping is an opportunity to provide whole group instruction, small group instruction and independent learning. Flexible grouping is a trademark strategy for differentiated instruction. This is different than the past concept of tracked groups, it instead uses students' strengths and weakness' to compose groups (Tomlinson, 2001). These groups remain flexible allowing the teacher to group and regroup as necessary. This gives them opportunities to interact with a variety of classmates. Some of the time is spent in whole group lessons, while when appropriate, students are split into heterogeneous and homogenous small groups and also they work independently. To make the grouping successful, front end training of students provides them with clear directions and skills to work in a small group setting (Tomlinson, 2001).

This assists in setting a climate of cohesiveness in the classroom. Students are not competing for the best score, rather they are in competition with themselves for their personal best. Through flexible grouping, teachers may begin with whole group instruction and divide the class based upon student ability. Using a positive climate to foster the students learning and they become empowered by their own learning. The child as taught as a whole embracing their physical, emotional, and intellectual needs. This is in contrast to whole group instruction in which is focused on standards based outcomes. Identifying students' needs and grouping them effectively as well as

providing meaningful learning opportunities support the students emerging independence (Tomlinson, 1999).

Adhering to the Curriculum and Standards

In addition to the aforementioned misconception, many perceive that differentiated instruction is watered down teaching. Tomlinson states:

Teachers should address the same concepts with all students but adjust the degree of complexity. The same concept can be explained in a way that's comprehensible to a very young child or in a way that challenges a Ph.D. candidate (2003).

Tomlinson goes on to outline that curriculum is typically based on broad concepts. It is through differentiation that key aspects of the curriculum are highlighted and made relevant to the learner. Often fragmented concepts are presented through required curriculum. Differentiated instruction uses the curriculum as a tool and organizes it around key concepts, themes and elements. To teach these concepts, themes and elements, multiple approaches are used based upon the classroom community and their backgrounds, skills, and abilities. Differentiation provides opportunities for all students to become engaged in meaningful, reflective tasks (Heacox, 2002).

There are three common ways to differentiated curriculum: by content, process or product. The particular means used depends on the student's needs. Each one of these

methods is married to the teacher's understanding of their student's needs, requiring teachers to provide established and on-going assessments.

Using content differentiation a teacher would provide variations to the materials that students are working with. This may encompass activities such as flip books, books on tape or video, supplementary materials to texts, reading companions, or think-pair-share (Mitchell & Hobson, 2005). Content differentiation is dependent upon a continuum of difficulty and complexity of directions ranging from highly complex to few or many directions. Teachers coincide the beginning point of the content to the student's ability level. Ultimately the goal is for the student to maneuver through the continuum as quickly and thoroughly as possible (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1995).

Using process to differentiate is obtained through the use of open-ended assignments. Open ended meaning that there is more than one correct answer or more than one correct way of attaining the answering. An example used by Kingore suggests replacing worksheets with active thinking activities. Kingore illustrates the use of the graphic organizer. This allows students to respond based on their ability level giving a wide range of abilities the opportunity to display their knowledge. This fits nicely in a mixed ability classroom. Process differentiation coincides with and can be very effective with a classroom that uses centers or study labs (Forsten, Grant, & Hollas, 2002)

Finally differentiating by product means that students have the opportunity to select among assignment options. The student objectives are the same, however, the method they to reach the outcome are different. For product differentiating the teacher provides multiple options for assignments. For example, students may select between

making a board game, video tape, a calendar, or a picture book as a cumulating activity (Kingore, 2004)

Differentiated Instruction and Cultural Awareness and Competence

Educators are as diverse as their students. Teachers may feel disconnected with students because of their differences. Carol Weinstein from Rutgers University, points out that the majority of teachers in K-12 classrooms are European American, English speaking females. In contrast to this, one third of students are non-English speaking minorities. As most teachers primarily are from an income range designated as middle class. The United States Census Bureau recognizes annual incomes ranging from \$34,000 to \$100,000 designated as middle class. In contrast, 20 percent of students in U.S. public schools derive from families who fall in the poverty designation and low income neighborhoods (Weinstein, 2003). In one study Geneva Gay of the University of Washington in Seattle further explains how there is a general expectation of teachers that students will behave and learn “as teachers do”. The European-American cultural standards transcend throughout schools and are integrated into curriculum and learning objectives (Gay, 2000). Gay reviews how teachers need to be aware of their cultural differences in classroom settings. To transcend the obstacles presented through differences in class, gender, race, ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation, first instructors must acknowledge that differences exist. Without doing so, bridges between home and school do not exist. Gay highlights that these bridges between home and school are essential to differentiated instruction. Incorporating multicultural information,

resources, and materials throughout content areas using skills routinely taught in schools will build meaningfulness to students.

To counter the cultural barrier, teachers should begin each new school year by identifying the interests of their students. Teachers should use their interest and cultural background to benefit their students during their learning. Teacher's encounter students with diverse backgrounds. This goes beyond gender and/or race but also embodies students with physical or emotional disabilities, English language learners, socioeconomics struggles and differences in learning styles (Tate & Debroux, 2001). To optimize the benefits of differentiated instruction, teachers must conduct an assessment during the onset of the year. This will allow educators to ascertain the knowledge that students are entering the classroom with. In addition educators can determine students' skills (Hess, 2005). The academic diversity needs of students push teachers to find the common ground with students and learn their backgrounds to incorporate into learning. Tomlinson (2001) points out that educators should reevaluate how they perceive teaching. Modern classrooms are a melting pot of personalities, skills, experiences, and backgrounds, educators cannot expect their students to fit the school mold; instead teachers must modify the curriculum to meet the needs of their students. Before learning can occur, students have a need to feel safe. Students will share and open the doors to learning when in a non-threatening environment that respects their backgrounds and views (Tomlinson, 2001).

Differentiated Instruction and Funding Needs

In their publication, *Differentiated instruction and implications for UDL Implementation*, Hall, Strangeman and Meyer target the issue of how public education relies on local, state, and national funding to support educational programs. Support from various levels of administration is essential in the success implementation of differentiated classrooms. Funding can lead to increased differentiated opportunities in the classroom. Differentiated instruction in most cases goes beyond what is provided in traditional textbook curriculum. Creating support for new strategies may lead to purchasing of equipment and professional development opportunities. Grants at various levels can be obtained to also subsidize the cost of expanding learning opportunities (Hall, Strangman & Meyer, 2003). They explain how teachers should look beyond the orthodox means of funding and seek out new untraditional forms in order to establish and maintain differentiated learning in their classrooms. One example of using funding creatively is for teachers to share workshops. One teacher may go to a workshop for a specific seminar that aligns with the teacher's strengths. Instead of the same teacher attending all of the seminars offered, another teacher on that particular team would have the opportunity to partake in a seminar that matches their strengths. There are also a plethora of grants available through local, state, and national corporations and agencies.

Reinick (1996) found that 100% of first year teachers that were interviewed said that lack of materials, insufficient planning time, and inadequate support were the primary reasons they were unable to effectively implement differentiated instruction in their classrooms.

With the dawn of the No Child Left Behind Act, the educational reform act initiated to hold schools accountable for student achievement, new requirements consumed educational dollars formally available for expanding curriculum. Although some view this as an educational set back, there are creative ways to use the funding to create differentiation strategies. During the birth of NCLB many of the mandates were unfunded. However, recently President Bush has allocated more dollars in the budget to be used towards assessment and administration of meeting the NCLB requirements. Although this is a far from the debt the act has created, it takes educators one step closer to closing the gap (Sokola, 2008).

Understanding Students:

In the early stages of the school year, it is imperative for teachers who are beginning to create differentiating strategies, to assess the individual abilities of their students. Teachers not only need to address the needs of their students but they also need to stay abreast of the professional development they will need to make differentiated instruction successful in their classrooms. A difficulty at this point is for teachers to change their mindset from being the instructor to becoming the facilitator of knowledge. Creating student goals and personal professional goals will assist in propagating student success (Tomlinson, 1999).

There are numerous factors that come into play when considering a differentiated classroom. To reach students from an array of cultural backgrounds using various grouping strategies, curriculum modifications, and hurdling financial, administrative and logistical barriers is a worthwhile goal. Many educational professionals have embraced

this challenge, while others have chosen to stand on the sidelines. The following findings display how educators in a suburban learning environment have used or not used differentiation techniques successfully. Also explored are the problems encountered and how these problems may be solved.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Research Design

Action research was the primary means of collecting information for this study.

Mills (2003) provides a comprehensive explanation as to what action research is:

Action research is any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers to gather information about the ways that their particular school operates, how they teach, and how well their students learn.

The information is gathered with the goals of gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment and on educational practices in general, and improving student outcomes. (p. 4)

With these primary action research objectives in mind; a.) gaining insight, b.) developing reflective practice, c.) effecting positive change in the school environment and on educational practices in general, and d.) improving student outcomes, the main goal in gathering the data was to understand differentiated instruction and how it is currently being utilized in elementary classrooms. The means of action research used for this study were both qualitative and quantitative in nature.

Overview of Research Site

The site chosen for this study is an elementary school located in a suburban vicinity. This community is located within 30 miles of a large metropolitan city. This particular school district serves multiple cities. These cities are on the outer fringes of the

suburban area and are experiencing extreme growth. Approximately 70 new teachers have been hired annually for the past four years.

This particular school is not experiencing the same growth as its sister schools within the district. Students attending this school traditionally are coming from surrounding low income neighborhoods. Directly across the street from the elementary school is government subsidized housing. In correlation with the low income housing, this school has 29% of students that receive free and reduced lunch. This is in contrast to the district wide average of 14% receiving free and reduced lunch. This school is the most diverse in the district as 29% of the student population is from a minority background. This provides the school with additional funding from the state and federal government.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) dawned in 2001. This act was created in an attempt to improve student achievement. The NCLB provides accountability standards for states, school districts, and individual schools. Also, students are provided with more options when selecting a school to attend. In order to track state compliance with the No Child Left Behind Act, the Minnesota Department of Education has implemented Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP) standards that each school must meet annually. If a school does not meet these standards they are in danger of losing funding, administrators, and staff. This school has achieved AYP since 2004 when AYP was implemented. In the year of 2006 this school was granted four stars in reading and three stars in Math. The star system represents progress that schools are attaining as measured by their results on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA). To satisfy the passing requirements, schools must receive three or more stars.

The district involved in this study is a proactive district. By this I mean they have chosen to take ownership of the accountability standards. To do this the district has created a program to work with the Department of Education in ensuring they are meeting accountability standards, rather than reacting to a situation in which the district would not meet the standards. This agreement which was ratified by the teachers includes an Alternative Teacher Performance Pay System (ATPPS). This incentive pay system is part of the state of Minnesota's Quality Compensation Program (Q-Comp). Districts who have a state approved proposal for Q-Comp receive additional funding from state resources. It is up to the school's discretion as to how the money will be spent. Through ATPPS teachers have the opportunity to receive additional pay based upon the achievement of yearly goals. These goals encompass student performance, professional growth, and department and district accomplishments. Upon attainment of the goal, the individual teachers will receive additional compensation. This pay system requires grade level, building and a district wide initiative to work together towards a common goal. Each year the progress towards goals is assessed and teachers are rewarded accordingly with additional compensation.

One measure that this district uses to track student achievement is the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) testing. These tests are administered through the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA). Students within the district take the MAP test three times each school year. The first testing session occurs during the first month of the school year. The score attained during the first session is used to place students in the appropriate math and literacy classes. Goals for the year are based upon the students' fall

scores. The second testing opportunity is to provide information on student progress. The spring score provides the official score in relation to attainment of student goals.

The district wide literacy initiative was piloted four years ago in 2004. The central mission of this initiative is a balanced literacy model. The balanced literacy block focuses on reading workshop, writing workshop, and spelling workshop. Students are exposed to various methods of reading, writing and spelling to provide a focus that provides a purpose for student learning. This is a strategy based instructional model that creates links between the literacy strands and provides students with skills to interweave what they learn in reading, writing, and spelling into other content areas. These strategy based instructional strategies are introduced to students district wide in kindergarten and are built upon through sixth grade.

Description of Participants

Twelve teachers participated in observation and interview portion of this study. These twelve teachers have diverse teaching backgrounds. All of the teachers involved have their own classrooms in which the observations were completed. The teachers ranged in ages from 23 – 51. Their years as teachers also were varied from a first year teacher to a teacher with 21 years of experience. The teachers were both male and female and all of Caucasian, non-Hispanic descent. Three of the teachers had taught in school districts other than the one involved in the study. One of the participants had been teaching the at same grade level as well as in the same school for 21 years. Six of the participants were male and six were female. The teachers belong to a variety of

professional organizations. They all participate in the Steve Dunn literacy training each year. The organizations in which the teachers belong to include:

National Education Association (NEA)

Minnesota Writing Project (MWP)

Minnesota Academic Excellence Foundation (MAEF)

Procedures

When first initiating the study, I focused on how I would recruit my participants. I began by posting a flier in the staff lounge indicating that I was conducting a study and would be interested in holding interviews and observations with various teachers. Those teachers who would be interested in assisting with this study contacted me through email or a conversation. I also distributed a questionnaire (Appendix A) that was anonymous to all the teachers in the building. Approximately twenty-three surveys were distributed and I received thirteen valid responses. To be considered valid, answers to all questions were evident and no deviation was made from the choices provided where appropriate. This survey focused upon teaching styles and teacher perception of students. Further questions revolved around instructional tools that teachers integrate into their lessons.

Although a quantitative survey was used, this study was mainly qualitative in nature. The first phase of the qualitative research began with a classroom observation conducted at the participating school. The twelve classroom teachers participating taught grades kindergarten through sixth grade. During the classroom observations I observed instruction during the first hour of the school day in each classroom environment. After I had conducted the observation teachers were asked a series of questions directed towards

their background in education, classroom dynamics, and views on diversity in the classroom (Appendix B). The classroom visits were conducted during my preparation hour therefore I observed each teacher for a period of 20-35 minutes. In totality I recorded approximately seven hours of observation time. Interviews with the participants took place after school hours. This allowed more time to focus on individual styles. Each interview lasted from 45 minutes to an hour. In total, ten hours of interview time was completed. Through the formal interview, I presented teachers with open ended questions. Through their responses new questions emerged and guide the interview questioning. The time spent in each classroom was designed to assist in understanding the use of instructional techniques in the classroom. Interview data aided in making connections to what was observed in the classroom, to the individual teacher's perception of classroom instruction as discussed during the interviews.

The aspect of the study that was quantitative in nature was the blind survey. In this anonymous survey teachers were asked to provide information on how they view the students in their classroom, the comfort level they have with students, how they use the curriculum, interaction with non-English speaking students, and other questions that assist in providing valuable insight to the instructional methods used by these teachers.

When preparing for the interviews, I referred to the chapter on in-depth interviewing from the book *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods* (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). They stated:

The in-depth interview is modeled after a conversation between equals, rather than a formal question-and answer exchange (p.77).

Using this as a basis to construct the interviews, I relied heavily upon Taylor and Bogdan's methodology. These are: the research interests are relatively clear and well-defined, the research depends on a range of settings or people, the researcher wants to illuminate subjective human experience and the researcher has time constraints (p. 84). The teachers selected for the interview also had certain experiences that I, the researcher, was looking to examine more closely.

Through the use of the formalized interview questions and the standard questionnaire, I was able to follow a formal procedure in order to obtain responses that were not predetermined or guided. As I conducted the interviews after I observed the classrooms, I was also able to ask questions about specific things in the classroom that I may have had questions about during my time in their classroom. The teachers were allowed to talk and explain why they chose a particular route of instruction, when questioned about it. There was information given that the interviewee provided that were not relevant to the study, however, taking the time to listen to them with patience lead to an increased comfort level. Having a higher comfort level, the teachers were more apt to be more open and willing to give pertinent information.

Analysis of the Data

Through hours of observations and twelve interviews with teachers, I compiled field notes and hours of recorded audio conversations. I read through and coded them. From these codes, themes emerged. To simplify the process, I wrote down the basic concepts and coded them in developing themes of differentiated instruction and compared those to the observations and conversations I conducted during my research at Crestview Elementary. I highlighted key concepts from each interview and observation. Several key terms and ideas began emerging throughout the individual observations and interviews. To assist me in coding the information I created web charts for each teacher using the terms and concepts. In addition, I had conducted a blind survey that provided information on teachers' attitudes towards curriculum, diversity in their classroom, and their tenure as a teacher. Themes began to emerge almost immediately as I sifted through hours of notes and dialogue. The themes that developed were:

- Adhering to the standards and curriculum
- Teaching procedures: Flexible grouping
- Teacher and student relationships
- Physical dynamics of the classroom setting

In the course of carrying out my observations, which were between 20-45 minutes in length, I used an audio recorder to assist me in going back and including important details I may have not been able to record manually. This enabled me to include important information regarding the tones that students and teachers used, pauses in conversations, and other audible information.

While coding my field notes, I first typed the notes on the computer by going through my written notes. Next I listened to the recordings of the observations and interviews and added any necessary details to the notes. To interpret the themes I began to search for the strategies evident during my observations that would encapsulate differentiated instruction. As these became evident, I made a subject web for each participant. As I am a visual learner this helped me to organize the information in a productive manner for me to understand. As I continued through the process with each observation and/or interview, I coded items such as a group activity “GL” for “group lesson”. I used similar codes for other activities such as small group or independent activities. I also made note of times that differentiated instruction was not apparent. When I noticed that strategies that fit into the differentiated instructional realm, I placed a “DI” next to them.

It was very insightful to see the themes emerge going through the notes. Many of the observations and themes connected to them also correlated with the research I had read. I saw in action the use of research based practices such as whole group, small group, independent learning, teacher interaction and modeling, and the use of curriculum. It was an incredibly difficult and time consuming task. As I dug more in depth to each conversation or observation, it became easier to see the themes.

Drawing upon grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), in which various types of research methods are used to gather information, I accumulated the material, studied the findings derived from the data, coded the information and then compared the data by evaluating it based upon criteria specific to what makes instruction differentiated.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

The main objective of this action research project was to answer several questions. These questions are: Is differentiate instruction beneficial to elementary students? Is differentiated instruction common place in the elementary classroom? What are some of the elements of differentiated instruction? And what are some common reasons why teachers do not use differentiated instruction? As interviews were conducted and observations completed, the theme of the study shifted. As a teacher researcher, the notable lack of differentiated instructed was apparent. This led me to believe that there were underlying causes to the lack of differentiation.

As outlined in the methodology the findings are based on the analysis of interviews with twelve elementary school teachers and observations in their respective classrooms. Further the findings are also based on a blind survey completed by 13 out of 23 teachers within an elementary school setting. Findings are reported under four main themes that emerged during this classroom study:

1. Grouping strategies used in the classroom environment
2. Use of curriculum in the elementary classroom
3. Understanding the students
4. Physical atmosphere in the elementary classrooms

In addition to the four themes that emerged during this research, a summary of the blind survey results is also included in the findings chapter.

Grouping strategies used in the elementary classroom:

An essential element of differentiated instruction is grouping. Flexible grouping strategies allow learners to interact in different ways. Whole class grouping is ideal for introductory discussions of the main class objective. Flexible grouping can work in several ways. First teachers may use small groups to put students together that have common needs. Also, the ability to put students into small groups is an outlet for teachers to allow student lead groups to form. Performance based groups also fall under the category of flexible grouping. These groups are developed based upon student performance. One example of this would be grouping reading students based upon their reading ability. The grouping or regrouping of students is not static in the differentiated classroom. Dependent upon the task, student grouping changes allowing the optimal setting for learning to occur.

During this research, both whole group and small group instruction was observed in the classrooms. In addition, teachers were knowledgeable on the use of these techniques and their benefits to students. The one common factor each classroom shared was the use of whole group instruction. In each classroom the instruction began with a whole group lesson. The use of whole-group instruction was observed as teachers began their lessons and introduced ideas, gave specific directions and shared results. In ten of the classrooms observed, or 83% of observed classrooms, the use of differentiated instructional grouping stopped at this point. In five of the classrooms students received the lesson during whole group and then began working on their assignments independently. In these classrooms all students received the same directives to complete the assignments. In five other classrooms, the teachers facilitated the assignments as a

whole group where class discussions originated. Valuable insights from students were shared during this time. Students were able to express their ideas in their own words. Some of the students in intermediate grades observed took this opportunity to take notes. Others in the same classrooms highlighted important concepts in the text rather than take notes.

Reactive differentiation during whole group instruction

Examples of what Tomlinson would describe as reactive differentiated instruction was observed in the ten classrooms observed. When a teacher practices reactive differentiated instruction, a group lesson is improvised on the spot in order to attempt individualize the content for the student or students. This is the easiest strategy in differentiation; however, the methods are not well defined in meeting the needs of the targeted students. For example, in one primary classroom involved in this study an English Language Learner (ELL) student was unable to understand the text, the teacher fumbled around her desk to find a white board. She continued on with the quest to find a marker and eraser for the student to use. The student was then directed to draw the story as he was hearing it read aloud. This displayed an immediate, unplanned reaction during instruction in an attempt to meet the needs of a particular student. Again in another classroom an example of reactive instruction was observed. This particular teacher was teaching a writing lesson. The lesson objective was for students to understand paragraph form. Students were instructed on using an orange square to symbolize where a new paragraph should begin. This strategy benefits visual learners. Some of the students were struggling with identifying where a new paragraph should begin. The teacher read

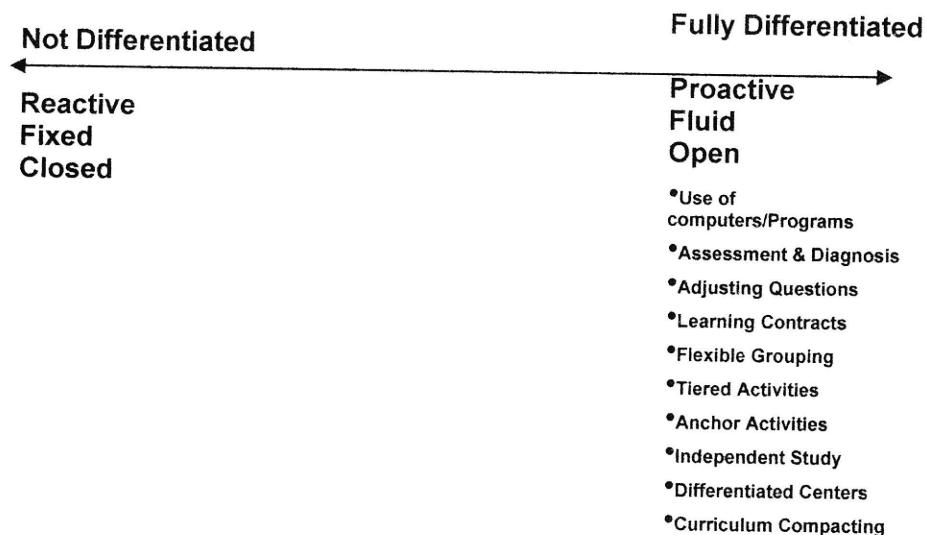
the story aloud and told the students to raise their hands when they heard a change in topic. This is where the new paragraph would begin. This reactive strategy was not planned; however, it did differentiate to meet the needs of the auditory learners in the classroom.

Optimal observations of flexible grouping

In the continuum of the learning spectrum, to the left being reactive and the right being proactive, classrooms who display a fluid learning atmosphere move the right of this spectrum (diagram 6.1) When flexible grouping is utilized, teachers move from being reactive instructors to being proactive. Being proactive in nature, teachers consciously integrate various learning style opportunities into their lessons. Otherwise, flexible grouping requires the teacher to ingrain the grouping strategy in the lesson plan. The implementation of proactive instruction was observed in these two classrooms.

Differentiated Instruction

diagram 6.1



Two of the classrooms used flexible grouping optimally. They were able to branch out from whole group instruction. This was something that the other ten classrooms observed were unable to achieve. The interesting commonality with these two classrooms is that these two teachers were also the two teachers observed with the least amount of classroom experience.

In the first classroom, the teacher began with a whole group lesson. During this whole group lesson the entire classroom received the same core content information. For this lesson the concept was making text connections. The teacher reviewed the three different types of text connections: text to text, text to self, text to world. After providing this information to the student audience, the teacher directed the students to various learning centers based throughout the room. There were four stations in total. The teacher was the facilitator at one of the stations. The teacher directed station the students read a short story out loud. When the story was finished, the teacher directed a discussion on how they connected to the story. The students wrote down words that they associated with the story and discussed why the story brought these words to mind and what type of connection they made. The other stations consisted of various activities that focused on three different types of learning styles. One center required each student to read a passage independently and use different colors of highlighters to indicate how they connected with that section of the text. The students used blue for text to text, yellow for text to self, and pink for text to world. Another station was a journaling station. The centers were on a weekly rotation so the students completed five journal entries. The journaling center had the daily newspaper. The students were to make a daily connection to what they read in the newspaper and record their thoughts in the journal. The last

center had physical objects. These objects included a spoon, a vacation brochure, a box of crayons and a stuffed bear. The students were to each take an object and discuss what they knew about it. They rotated objects and shared on each item with the entire group. Students realized that they were making connections with these objects, much like they can make connections to the characters, items, and themes in text.

Also observed in this classroom the same teacher used flexible grouping during reading instruction. This teacher had again used a center approach and presented several centers throughout the classroom. At one of the centers students met with the teacher to discuss their reading workshop novel. During the discussion with students I observed that she was able to relate the novel to each student involved in the discussion. When a student was not participating in the discussion she pulled them in using something that she knew they were familiar with. The book that they were discussing was *The Westing Game*. This is a mystery much like the game of clue. The students were excited about sharing information about the book except for one student who obviously was nervous about sharing her insights. The teacher allowed the other students to share and then she said to the girl, “Kelly, you told me that you enjoyed riding your bike. You must have liked the character Turtle in the book because she rides her bike everywhere. What did you think about Turtle?” When the teacher pulled the student in, the flood gates opened and the student began talking endlessly about Turtle and how she knew that she didn’t commit the crime. That led into her thoughts on the other characters and what she liked and did not like about them and their roles in the story. At the other centers students had varied activities that provided choices for completing the assigned task. They were given choices such as drawing, writing or having a discussion (pair share) with another student.

When discussing the observation with the teacher during my interview, she highlighted how she looks at the lexile scores of students and their ability to interact with other students when comprising her reading workshop groups. She understands that she has to provide leaders in the groups that will be able to display good reading traits to the students who have not achieved that level. Also she looks at the interests of students and provides reading material for them that tie into those interests. She said, "Students become actively engaged when the material is meaningful to them. It is especially hard with grouping boys with girls. Boys have such different interests than girls in reading." She also went on to explain that by giving the students different tasks during the centers, she is better able to connect with students who have different learning styles. The different centers all focus on the various learning styles giving everyone the opportunity to learn.

In the second classroom where effective flexible grouping was observed students were arranged at tables. This classroom was a 6th grade classroom. This teacher was instructing the same orange square lesson as the teacher who displayed reactive differentiation. This teacher was also instructing a writing class and initiated the lesson with a whole group lesson on paragraph form. The teacher explained a strategy of placing an orange square at the beginning of each paragraph. If the square was over the writing, then the student did not indent and needed to do so. After the teacher completed the explanation of using the orange square then he rotated among the tables and used various techniques with students as appropriate. If a student was unable to draw a square, the teacher had them place their thumb on the beginning of the paragraph and the paragraph was to be indented as to where their thumb print ended. Other students were beyond the

orange square concept and he gave them an alternative activity that challenged them to find the paragraphs in writing other than their own. They also had to explain why they knew it was a new paragraph such as transition words used or change in topic. The teacher explained this concept to me as application groups. He discussed the theory of it is not what the students know, but how they are able to apply the concept to ingrain it in their memory and make it comprehensible to them to retain and retract from their memory when necessary. He presented multiple ways students could apply the material therefore making instruction differentiated for student who letter better using a varied technique. He provided the analogy of teachers as coaches and the students are the team. "I provide a game plan for my students. Just like in sports, some students are better at different positions. I look at the positions as types of learning."

Use of curriculum in elementary classrooms:

Three common methods of curriculum differentiation are: by content, process or product. These are outlined in detail in the review of literature. Differentiating curriculum based upon students needs is an essential element of success. Providing variations of the materials (content), variations in assessment (process), and variation with assignments (product).

Curriculum expectations based on state standards and district requirements drive instruction. This was the common theme evident among interviewed teachers. The twelve teachers interviewed had varied views on how to use the curriculum and the role of curriculum in differentiated instruction.

A pivotal comment was made by a veteran teacher during an interview:

There are a hundred ways to instruct. The delivery of the curriculum is dependent upon the individual who is delivering it. The hard curriculum is data driven; the way we as instructors teach is subjective allowing us multiple ways to present it.

This specific quote embodies the essence of differentiated instruction. Textbooks are a part of the curriculum but the curriculum goes beyond the textbook. Curriculum encompasses all materials used to present the lesson content. Teachers interviewed had various views on the district curriculum and how they use it in their classrooms. Ten of the teachers felt that the math textbook was essential to the curriculum. Of these teachers, three of them supplement the material with manipulatives that allow the students to use object exploration. Although the district math curriculum (Hardcourt) provides manipulatives that correspond to the lessons, these three teachers have found other materials that they use. One gave the example during our interview discussion of a lesson using graphs in a bag. This teacher put objects in a zip lock bag such as a index card, stickers, a bag of skittles, M & M's or other colored candy, a newspaper clipping of daily temperatures for a week long period and information on tests taken by the grade in September and then again in January. The students were to use the stickers to make a pictograph, the candy to make a circle graph, the temperatures to make a line graph and the grade information to make a bar graph. The graphs in a bag are given after the

graphing chapter and students are not given specifics on what items are to be used for each graph. The teacher explained that by leaving it open ended, she receives many different insightful answers from the students. Using open ended assignments is a way that teachers can differentiate curriculum using the process method. As long as the student can use all the materials and make the required graphs, they have completed the project. Although she has her own preset ideas of what each item should be used for, she knows that the students may have different ideas that can add value to the assignment and expand her own thinking. Teachers are learners also and by not having a preset list of answers, student learning not only allows their own mind to expand but also the teachers.

Another teacher explained how they used pizza for not only learning about fractions, but also as a classroom discipline tool. The class has a pizza box on the front white board. An eight slice pizza is drawn in black marker on the bottom of the box. Along side the pizza in an envelope on the board are pieces of construction paper that represent pizza toppings. When the students display good behavior, they can add toppings to a certain fraction of the pizza. When the class has used all the toppings in the envelope, they have earned a pizza party. The teacher explained that this engages students who typically will avoid the math concept of fractions. Many students avoid fractions and will not participate in classroom discussions as their comfort level on the topic is low. By creating an activity that students enjoy and understand, it makes the concept less threatening. The students participate and learn.

Using the pizza box as a classroom behavior tool masks the objective of learning fractions. This is method of differentiating through content. The students who normally would not participate in a discussion about fractions now see it in a different light. They

let their guard down and participate when the outcome is not a grade, but a physical reward.

Another common theme during the interviews regarding curriculum is the ever changing standards and requirements. One teacher summarized,

The standards and expectations of teachers change every year.

However, we have the same curriculum. The textbooks need to be modified and it is the expectation that the teachers understand what to use and what not to use from year to year out of the textbook.

Teacher attitudes such as this towards the curriculum add another responsibility to their list. The ever growing demands of the profession detract from their primary goal, to educate students. The time that it takes teachers to review the textbooks and other corresponding curriculum, determine what applies to the standards and modify it to make it meaningful and comprehensible to the students in their classrooms deters many teachers from implementing strategies beyond the manuals. One teacher conveyed, “There is too much to get through. I simply rely on the district pacing guides just to get through the material that is expected of me. The state mandated tests are here before you know it and that is how are teaching is assessed - by the tests.”

Understanding the students:

The belief that students learn best when they are able to make connections to the material presented to them. In order for students to make these connections, teachers need to have knowledge of students' prior knowledge, their interests and their abilities. Understanding their students, teachers can use differentiated instruction to provide assignments, activities and assessments that match their students' interests.

As I observed each classroom during this study I inventoried the classroom dynamics. In all of the classrooms visited, students in ELL, special education, gifted and talented programs and students from varied cultures were represented. This realization reinforced the importance of understanding your student population.

As a part of the teacher survey, one question focused on teachers' approach towards the need for understanding their students.

Question number 12 –

“I review my class each year and intertwine the background of my students into my lessons.”

The response provided displayed that this is not a common practice. 60% responded that they indeed did not make it a regular practice to weave the backgrounds of their students into their lessons. 40% responded that they did embody the experience of their students into their lessons. Of these teachers who did respond that, yes, they did incorporate the backgrounds into the lessons; these were teachers who had five or less years of teaching experience. One of the teachers interviewed expressed:

One strategy that I use at the beginning of the year is I use various icebreaker activities to get to know the students. In addition to those, we have a sharing time at the beginning of each day for students to share something about their lives since the time we last meet. This allows me to learn more about their backgrounds and interest. By simply knowing what the last movie they saw or the last holiday they celebrated gives me valuable information that I can use and integrate into my lessons for the year.

Creating a classroom community of learners is an essential tool to making this a successful strategy. The facilitator role that the teacher embarks on at the beginning of the year should provide students with guidance on making information memorable for the students.

Two additional questions from the questionnaire addressed the teachers' attitudes towards differences of students.

Question number 7 stated –

“When I have a non-English speaking student in my classroom, I look for new ways to communicate with them.”

The results showed that 60% of teachers are aware of ELL students in their classroom and they seek out new ways to reach those learners. Of those teachers responding always, the average years of service for those teachers was 14 years. 10% of teachers stated they sometimes investigate new ways to connect with non-English speaking students. Upon dialoging with teachers, especially those who are first year or new

teachers, we discussed the low response from teachers in their years of service range. Teachers suggested a cause for this low feedback to this answer is the lack of training in this realm. The more experienced teachers expressed that they learn through practice. Yearly they acquire skills in communicating with ELL students through working with them.

Another question in the questionnaire, focused on gender.

Question number 13 –

“I feel better when I learn that my class list includes more boys than girls.”

60% of surveyed teachers answered that either rarely or never do they feel better when there are more boys than girls present on their class lists. In contrast question number 14 reversed the question and stated I feel better when I learn that my class list includes more boys than girls. 50% of those responding indicated that they feel better or more comfortable with their class before they even meet them, if there are more girls on the list than boys. In response to both answers, it was the more seasoned teachers with 14 or more years of experience that felt more content having a higher percentage of females in their classrooms. In general more teachers have a higher comfort level when they have a greater number of girls in the classroom. When I interviewed several of the teachers our questions ventured into this realm. Upon discussing the issue one teacher stated “Girls are easier.” This was a common theme. Also witnessed in the classroom were a greater number of girls called upon than boys.

Physical Atmosphere:

Differentiated classrooms do not have the traditional classroom look or feel. Parents have a need for familiarity. Encompassing the family into the learning atmosphere can be done by providing classroom tours and educating the parents in regards to why the classroom has a different appearance. Not only may parents be confused about the look of these classrooms, students may be unfamiliar with them as well. Student discussions on how the classroom works, what they enjoy about it, what helps them learn and how does the classroom run successfully assist in helping the students take ownership of the space (Tomlinson, 2000).

A supportive environment must be maintained in order for differentiated instruction to be successful. A safe, positive atmosphere that is created by the instructor will allow the students to have a high level of comfort. This setting will allow students to feel safe enough to take a risk without the fear of failing (PTTAN, 2004). Classroom dynamics extend into the physical atmosphere of the classroom. The manner in which the classroom is arranged tangibly has an impact on student learning, achievement and level of comfort. To create an effective differentiated classroom, a variety of components must be present. First work and study areas must be available. In addition, computer stations that allow students online access are fundamental to the classroom. Ideally, art areas as well as science exploration areas would be a part each classroom would be present. This allows various avenues for differentiation strategies to take place (Dinnocenti, 1998). Upon viewing the physical make up of the classrooms observed, I saw several examples of different ways teachers used desks and other classroom furniture to group. Carpets, bookshelves, supply areas, art areas, and reading zones were all

visible attributes in the observed classrooms. The teachers in the various classrooms had unique and creative techniques in arranging the classrooms. These distinctive classroom arrangements pave a learning pathway for students. Desk arrangements throughout these classrooms, with the exception of two, displayed teacher interest in applying grouping strategies into their instruction (Appendix D). The two classrooms that did not display an arrangement conducive to flexible grouping had linear desk design of two or three rows. Rows such as this do not provide easy opportunities for students to do group work. It instead portrays an atmosphere of independent learning expectations.

I was intrigued by one room that grouped all girls in one area and all boys in another. When I had the opportunity to discuss this with the teacher during our interview they explained,

Gender specific classrooms have been researched and found to be successful. I thought I would try to a modified version of gender grouping in my classroom. It has made my flexible grouping much easier. Girls have different learning styles than boys and are more alike to each other as boys are more hands on learners. This just takes one step out of the process by keeping them in like groups. Sometimes I add a girl to a boys group or vise versa, but for the most part, they enjoy working this way, it cuts down on some of the classroom discipline issues, and I can focus on other areas that I can provide new learning opportunities.

A sixth grade classroom did not have desks at all. Instead the desks were replaced by six tables. Five students were placed at each table. In the middle were materials that they may need for the day. Usually that included a caddy with pencils, colored pencils and/or markers, glue, scissors and lined paper. The teacher explained:

What was frustrating is that I requested the tables two years ago.

The tables just made it into my classroom now, mid-way through the school year. I decided that even though we had a classroom environment set up that they were used to, I wanted to try to use the tables and see how the students would respond.

I inquired as to where the students kept their other materials such as textbooks. He explained:

I don't assign a specific textbook to an individual student. I

Decided that I would use a bookshelf to house the textbooks. When it is time for us to use the textbooks, one student from each table goes to the bookshelf and gets the number of books they need for their table. I have seen a big change in how we use our time.

When students had desks, they spent more time digging through messy 6th grade desks. There was always so much commotion that it was hard to get them back on task.. Also students don't keep things in their desks that they shouldn't have in class. They don't have

ipods or cell phones that they previously could hide under a desk lid.

I call it family style learning.

Usually the groupings he places at each table are learners who are not alike. In some instances he ability groups, mostly he prefers to place a kinesthetic learner with both auditory and visual learners.

The use of carpet areas allows for students to have a comfortable group area. Four classrooms that I observed had lessons that began in the carpeted area and then moved into flexible working groups. These groups all began with a story read aloud at the carpet by the teacher. One teacher used a big book in which the students could easily follow along. Once she read the book, she provided smaller versions of the books for students to bring back to their desks with them. The students' desks were arranged in pods of four desks. Typically there were two boys and two girls at each pod. The students in each pod were given a different task. The teacher sat at one pod with the group of learners and discussed what they understood about each page. If they had questions, she had large post-it notes that she had them write their questions on and they placed in on the appropriate page. While she was with one group of students, the other groups had different jobs. One group had to draw a picture of what they thought was happening on the page without pictures. Another group had to make a play of the story. The final group read aloud reading one sentence per student. The room arrangement made these activities possible. Having a large group area where the students could comfortably see and listen to the story was essential to the instruction. In addition, the

students all had areas of the room where they could work with their groups. She explained this as follows:

I make every attempt to ensure that every student has the opportunity to experience different types of learning. I am aware of what activities best suite certain students. When a particular student is at an activity that I know best matches their learning style, I make sure that they are able to lead that center or activity.

She explained to me that she tries to make sure that every student has an opportunity to do the different types of learning. However, she knows which students will do best with the activities. When those students are on that activity, she makes sure that they are a group leader facilitating that activity.

What Barriers to differentiated instruction are teachers encountering?

Teachers who strive to differentiate their classrooms encounter various barriers. The ability to network within teaching communities, acquiring updated materials, labor intensive preparation, and administrative support are all obstacles to the path of differentiated instructional success.

The interviews assisted in gaining a deeper understanding of why differentiated instruction was not used more in the classrooms observed. When discussing with teachers the lack of visible differentiated instruction such as flexible grouping, the common response was the lack of training in facilitating differentiated instruction. One

teacher expressed, “We hear about differentiated instruction all the time. I know that I should be doing it, I just don’t know how. I have taught the same lessons for 12 years and they have worked. I just don’t know how to make them better using different grouping techniques.” This frustration was noted several times during the course of interviewing teachers. Although they understood that it is a best practice, it is a practice they are unable to implement due to lack of understanding and training.

Another barrier voiced by teachers was that when working on their grade level teams, not all teacher are comfortable with differentiated instruction and therefore do not want to use it in their classrooms. A teacher that I will call Jane shared the following:

This makes it difficult to team when there are conflicting views of how learning should be occurring. In today’s classrooms students in primary as well as intermediate grades are being exposed to departmentalized teaching where they change classrooms for different subjects. This is where it becomes imperative to work as teams. By not having full buy in to an instructional technique it becomes confusing for students and difficult for all teachers involved.

Directly related to this is preparing students for a differentiated room. Students need to become accustomed to a new look and new feel of a differentiated classroom. Teachers find it cumbersome to retrain students to become familiar with a new type of learning environment. One teacher interview stated:

It takes valuable classroom instructional time to review how learning will happen in your classroom. After they leave your classroom, they go to another classroom that will undo everything you just instructed them.

The next day, it all starts over again.

This directly coincides also with the teaming aspect. If all of the teachers on a team are creating different learning environments, the question arises if students would become confused.

The next topic of discussion that arose during the interviews in regards to barriers encountered was requirements placed upon teachers from both the state and district level. Teachers are required to use pacing guides, prepare students for the standardized testing, adhere to state standards and curriculum guidelines. One teacher expressed their frustration in the following quote:

I have so much to think about already. I have where the time is going to come from to interweave differentiated instruction. Pacing guides provide a map for me to follow. Differentiated instruction requires flexible timelines which just is not an option in our building.

Yet another concern arose during the interview process. Teachers discussed how they know that students possess different learning styles, but they don't understand how to determine these learning styles. Teacher Bob said:

I learned so much in college about different learning styles.

Students learn differently. That is true. But I never was taught

how to figure out what these learning styles are.

There are an excess of resources available to teachers on learning styles, but there is very little information on how to determine student learning styles in an efficient and meaningful way.

Finally the last common theme in relation to the barriers confronted by teachers is funding and educating administrators and parents on differentiated instruction. First, funding is limited. Of the two classrooms in which flexible grouping was observed, the 6th grade classroom that used tables instead of desks required the district to purchase six round tables in addition to more than 30 chairs. This was a costly venture that the district was unwilling to cover. Therefore this 6th grade teacher found a grant to cover the cost of classroom tables and chairs. The physical environment of the differentiated room is very important. The physical environment creates the atmosphere for students to practice various types of learning in the classroom. To be a proactive learning environment the following resources should be made available: computers, grouping capabilities using desks or tables, learning centers, accessibility of supplies and reading areas. Because the physical atmosphere of the classroom is much different than a traditional classroom, teachers interviewed argue that it makes it difficult to sell differentiated instruction to administrators and parents. First administrators see the dollar signs when presented with lists of resources needed. Parents question the ability to manage a classroom that does not look and feel like a traditional classroom. A teacher explained one encounter with a parent, “The parent was skeptical about how I could manage classroom behavior if the

students were not all lined up in linear rows.” A common message during the teacher interviews was that they spend so much time on parent communication and educating them on the classroom that it takes away from lesson planning and other classroom preparations.

An additional observation made during this study was that of the two classrooms that were able to provide flexible grouping, the teachers were within their first five years in the profession. I relate their ability to use differentiated strategies to their recent college coursework. In preparation for the teaching profession, soon to be teachers learn the best practices. Teachers who have been in the world of education for ten or more years are not as familiar with the new concepts and don't have the avenues to be trained. Educators understand the needs of their students and that their student population is changing. The in-service training available for teachers is not keeping up with the needs of the classrooms.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion and Recommendations

My initial intent of the research was to observe teachers in their educational settings to study the integration of instructional strategies related to differentiated instruction in the classroom. The teachers' attitudes towards curriculum, diversity in their student population and their ability to adapt strategies to make learning meaningful to their students were a key element of the study. The spectrum of teaching experience was beneficial to this study as I wanted to see how a new teacher, recently emerging from the college environment, used the curriculum and various strategies, compared to a teacher who had been in the classroom for twenty or more years. I relied upon the survey results (Appendix C) to have an additional comparison as to what I observed in the classroom. I further wanted to understand if teachers had a full awareness of differentiated instruction and if they were open to the implementation of the strategies in the classroom setting.

The findings that I comprised through the research of the literature further expanded my initial inquiry. Going beyond the initial quest for teachers' strategies and attitudes towards differentiation, additional findings included the physical make up of the classroom, barriers such as funding and misconceptions, and also creating relationships with students as a whole.

The task of differentiating in the classroom can be entirely overwhelming to any teacher regardless of the number of years they have spent in the classroom. For teachers who are new to the profession, the central focus should be on gradual modification of lessons. It is not realistic for any teacher, new or veteran to expect to modify every

lesson. The pivotal aspect of differentiating is to alter lessons when there is a student need to do so. When the teacher identifies the need for modification, they must also be certain that the change will increase the probability that students will achieve a better understanding of the objectives (Tomlinson, 1999). In an Education Insights pod cast interview with Steve Decker, Carol Ann Tomlinson discussed the aspect of getting to know our students. Students in the United States educational setting are becoming more complex as each year passes. It is not uncommon for English language learners (ELL), students with various learning disabilities, experiential gaps, gifted and talented students to be encompassed in one classroom.

The educational arena is full of research based best practices. What I saw was very similar to what the literature explained. The teachers I was observing on average had 10 years of teaching experience. Those teachers that had less years of teaching experience had more strategies that implement differentiated instruction. These teachers also strayed further from the textbook. The teachers that I observed in the classroom had various degrees of creating a physical environment for differentiated instruction. The spectrum ranged from linear rows and no access to learning centers or stations to one classroom of 6th grade learners that had round tables. This was very conducive to implement the strategies necessary to make flexible grouping successful. This teacher could effectively switch students around at a moments notice fostering their independent learning style.

In all the classrooms that I observed, the use of whole group lessons was the primary means of teaching. During these whole group instructional times, teacher assessment of students was apparent. Students who needed extra time or assistance could

obtain it. Only in the case of the 6th grade classroom did I see a teacher utilizing the flexible grouping strategy to its utmost. I believe that one main reason this occurred was due to funding. This particular teacher researched funding to purchase the tables rather than using the traditional desks. Materials were placed in the middle of the desks and were visible at all times. Teachers who used the desks indicated that they found it awkward to move the desks with the chairs attached. Moving them was distracting to learning.

To effectively implement differentiated instructional strategies, teachers need administrative support, funding, time, and desire. Through my teacher interviews, I learned that time and support were the major obstacles. All of the teachers agreed that differentiated instruction was a best practice. However, the teachers had the desire to implement it, but other constraints were prohibitive to full implementation in their classrooms. Teachers did use tools such as literature circles and writing workshop. Many of the teachers also discussed how they used the districts curriculum as a guide. They stated that they use it to provide the basics and they build their lessons off of that depending on their students needs.

Conceptualized Differentiated Instruction:

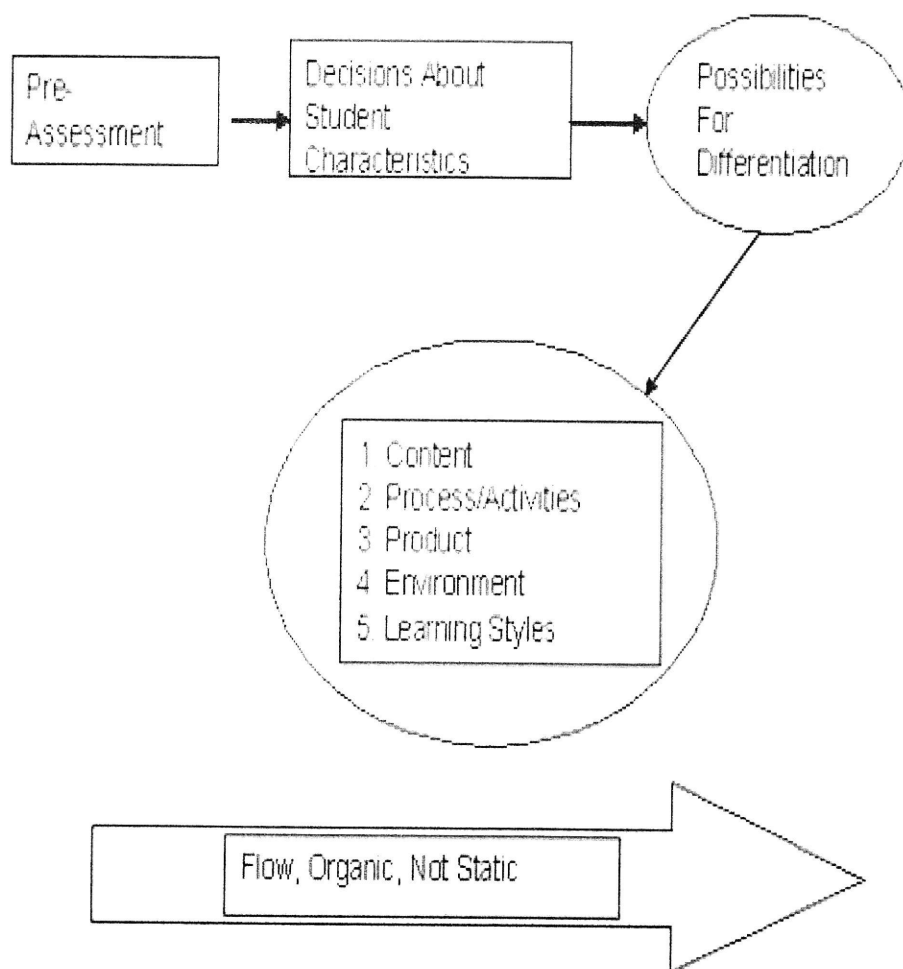
Model 1.1 is an effective visual for the overall concept of differentiating the classroom. The pre-assessment leading to the decisions about what you need to know about the student to effectively instruct them is an imperative part to strategizing the techniques for differentiation. This all leads to teaching the content using flexible grouping, addressing the environment and keeping in tune with the students' learning

styles. Using the curriculum in ways that is meaningful to students is a non-static flow that makes learning relevant to students.

Throughout this study, the progress towards implementing differentiated instruction as a non-static process is evident. Through the understanding of students, grouping strategies, use of curriculum and the physical atmosphere of the classrooms, teachers are attempting to execute differentiated processes. In most cases it looks reactive in nature. These reactive measures are a feeble attempt to meet the needs of students. As we gain years of experience, it is my hope that we also gain optimism and skills to become a proactive community of educational professionals.

In the future, I would be interested in researching administrative views on differentiated instruction and looking more in detail at the assessment measures needed.

MODEL 1.1



DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION GRAPHIC

Recommendations

Throughout the research process, the focus of the study gradually changed as I progressed through the observations. Initially the purpose was to watch differentiated instruction in progress. By identifying the strategies used, through the research best practices in differentiated instruction would emerge. As the observations began what was viewed in the classrooms was the actual absence of differentiated instruction. During the interviews there were several explanations of why classroom instruction was lacking varied approaches. As outlined in the findings portion of the research these included:

- Planning Time.
- Planning Environment.
- Preparing the students for differentiated instruction
- Have to cover the curriculum
- Use of pacing guides
- Testing Requirements
- Determining learning styles
- Teach the way taught
- Funding
- Educating the administrators, parents and community of the benefits for DI.

A gradual metamorphous occurred during the research from viewing and understanding best practices in differentiated instruction to analyzing why differentiated instruction was not a common practice in the elementary classroom. Through the interviews I gained a broader understanding of the obstacles teachers were encountering. An investigation

began as to how to make a change in the classroom and through this investigation the following recommendations are presented:

- Have a clear rationale for differentiation,
- Prepare students and parents for a differentiated classroom,
- Attend to issues of classroom structure and management as they move toward more student-centered learning,
- Move toward differentiation at a pace comfortable to both teacher and learners, and
- Plan with team members and other colleagues interested in differentiation.
- Emphasize creative thinking when designing lessons.
- Strive for a balance between teacher assigned and student choice activities.
- Assess before, during and following lesson.
- Provide CHOICES!
- Be flexible with time.
- Learning objectives are planned (proactive)

I will elaborate on several of these recommendations.

At the top of the list is for teachers to gain a clear rationale of what differentiated instruction is. The overwhelming thought of adapting lessons to meet individual needs of each student is unnerving to teachers. Teachers need to be trained as to what differentiated instruction is as well as what it is not. First and foremost it is not providing individual lessons for each student in the classroom. Providing teachers with a concise understanding of DI is imperative.

Fostering positive relationships with parents is a key component of differentiated instruction. The next recommendation places the teacher parent relationship at the core of a successful DI classroom. Parents are used to the familiar feel of the traditional classroom that they most likely experience themselves. Through the new look of the differentiated classroom parents may develop misconceptions about their student's learning experience (Glasgow & Hicks, pg. 193). Teachers should have clearly defined areas of the classroom and invite parents to tour the classroom and be available to answer questions they may have. Throughout the school year teachers should provide updates as to what the students are doing and how they are learning. During conferences teachers should stress the students learning strengths and how those are addressed through the use of differentiated instruction. In addition, parents and administrators are partners in student learning. As a partner, parents and administrators could be a part of daily learning by participating in the center activities or leading a small or whole group activity.

Fostering proactive and effective teaching teams is a key element of differentiated instruction. The recommendation for teachers to migrate to this is for grade level teaching teams to first define themselves as teachers. They should look at individual strengths and weaknesses. Next as a team they will review these strengths and weaknesses to begin planning strategies between their classrooms in which they can effectively use strategies that provide a plethora of learning opportunities for students. Also, teachers should identify a teaching partner who works with them throughout the school year as a peer coach. Together as a team they can work on examining what works and does not work within their respective classrooms. It often is helpful to have a second set of eyes to view the learning as it occurs and then provide feedback to the teacher

being observed. Through the teaming aspect teacher should also share barriers they are encountering such as discipline issues, cultural barriers and curriculum setbacks with each other. They may find answers from colleagues that they would not have thought of on their own.

The last recommendation that I will elaborate on is the proactive lesson planning approach. Teachers are able to manage the lesson more effectively when they have used a well thought out process when planning their lessons. While in the planning stages of the lesson, the teacher should use their understanding of personal learning styles present in the classroom. Building on learning styles, teachers should also examine strategies that minimize student boredom and stimulate student interest in the lesson content. By focusing on these areas teachers will provide strategies that encourage more student questions. When students are asking questions, their mind is working and they are learning.

The list of recommendations could be endless. These are just a few that teachers can use to build upon to start a successful differentiated classroom.

CHAPTER 6

Self-Reflection

This past year I transitioned from an elementary classroom setting where I taught 5th grade, to a junior high setting where I am teaching 6th grade. Although there is just one year between these students, the atmosphere of the junior high setting had a significant impact on my own teaching style. Where in the past I felt that I did what I could using the resources available to implement some differentiated instruction, this past year the desks I once had were now chairs with the attached table top desk. There ability to group was very limited by the simple furniture in the room. When I completed the observations and interviews, I was enlightened at how teachers expressed the frustrations about having a best practice dangled in front of them, but having obstacles like desks stand in their way.

I was indeed shocked at the sheer absence of differentiated instructional strategies observed in the classroom and how my research changed because of it. However, I could completely understand the obstacles that teachers were encountering and embraced that as my new focus for the study. Having the exposure to the elementary classroom as well as the junior high classroom setting provided me with various views from the teacher's perspective. The school atmosphere plays a major role in how you differentiate in your classroom and what barriers you may encounter when trying to do so.

The perseverance it took to complete this study was an eye opening experience for me. Finding the topic for my research was a struggle within itself. Also working with colleagues to complete the study at the school where I worked while it was convenient it also provided awkward moments between my personal views clashing with

a co-worker. It was difficult to abstain from getting into a thoughtful discussion about my own personal views regarding differentiated instruction during the teacher interviews. Had I done that the research would not have been as relevant. It was interesting to hear the personal views of other teachers who were in the same teaching environment as myself.

I am confident that the research that I completed will only deepen my knowledge of meeting student needs, and heighten my ability to be a successful facilitator for my students. Through the research process I came across several lessons that I have implemented into my classroom. There are simplified strategies available to execute differentiating. Although I don't have a physical atmosphere that accommodates the needs of creating centers or learning stations, I can offer student choice through other avenues such as book reports.

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Sokola

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TEACHER SURVEY

School _____ Year levels taught _____ Years of teaching _____
(last 5 years)

Please tick one box only for each item

- | | | | | | | |
|----|--|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1 | I adhere to the curriculum as outlined by the district and instruct the lessons as defined in the manual. | Always <input type="checkbox"/> | Usually <input type="checkbox"/> | Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> | Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> | Never <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2 | It is important to be willing to try new things in my teaching. | Always <input type="checkbox"/> | Usually <input type="checkbox"/> | Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> | Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> | Never <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3 | All students are capable of understanding math concepts. | Always <input type="checkbox"/> | Usually <input type="checkbox"/> | Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> | Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> | Never <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4 | All students are capable of understanding science concepts. | Always <input type="checkbox"/> | Usually <input type="checkbox"/> | Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> | Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> | Never <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5 | I ask students to explain their answers. | Always <input type="checkbox"/> | Usually <input type="checkbox"/> | Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> | Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> | Never <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6 | Instructional strategies that I use as a teacher can increase a child's interest in a particular subject. | Always <input type="checkbox"/> | Usually <input type="checkbox"/> | Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> | Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> | Never <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7 | When I have a non-English speaking student in my classroom, I look for new ways to communicate with them. | Always <input type="checkbox"/> | Usually <input type="checkbox"/> | Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> | Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> | Never <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8 | Parents should be partners with teachers regarding the education of their children. | Always <input type="checkbox"/> | Usually <input type="checkbox"/> | Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> | Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> | Never <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9 | Students learn best through textbooks. | Always <input type="checkbox"/> | Usually <input type="checkbox"/> | Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> | Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> | Never <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10 | I feel uncomfortable when I encounter students from different cultures or backgrounds than my own. | Always <input type="checkbox"/> | Usually <input type="checkbox"/> | Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> | Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> | Never <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11 | I incorporate diverse backgrounds into my classroom library. | Always <input type="checkbox"/> | Usually <input type="checkbox"/> | Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> | Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> | Never <input type="checkbox"/> |

- 12 I review my class each year and intertwine the background of my students into my lessons. Always ☐ Usually ☐ Sometimes ☐ Rarely ☐ Never ☐
- 13 I feel better when I learn that my class list includes more boys than girls. Always ☐ Usually ☐ Sometimes ☐ Rarely ☐ Never ☐
- (SURVEY CONTINUED ON BACK SIDE)
- 14 I feel better when I learn that my class list includes more girls than boys. Always ☐ Usually ☐ Sometimes ☐ Rarely ☐ Never ☐
- 15 Setting individual goals for each student is a yearly focus. Always ☐ Usually ☐ Sometimes ☐ Rarely ☐ Never ☐
- 16 I strive to ensure that I am incorporating the backgrounds of all students into the curriculum. Always ☐ Usually ☐ Sometimes ☐ Rarely ☐ Never ☐

Which part of teaching do you enjoy the **most**? _____

Which part of teaching do you enjoy the **least**? _____

What preparations do you make each year as you prepare to instruct a new classroom of learners?

Please turn completed survey into my mailbox in the school office.

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS SURVEY!

Interview Questions

Please give me an overview of your experience as a teacher.

Have you seen your classroom dynamics change during your years as a teacher? How?

How do you adjust to these changes?

Describe a typical day in your classroom.

How do you teach to children of different backgrounds? Do you have specific strategies that you incorporate for different backgrounds, for example if you have a Hmong student in your classroom, what might you do?

In recent years there has been a trend to use such instructional tools as the Responsive Classroom approach. What instructional tools do you use?

What elements do you see to be most beneficial to your students?

What do you find to be the most challenging aspect of teaching?

What are your views on the standard curriculum that is used in your school district?

Do you use the curriculum as it is outlined in the manuals?

What do you believe to be the single most important part of classroom instruction?

Teacher Survey Overview

I conducted a teacher study to gather information on teaching styles in the current educational settings. The survey was distributed to 23 teachers at Crestview Elementary. 14 teachers responded. Crestview Elementary is located in Cottage Grove, Minnesota is a part of the South Washington County School District. The school houses approximately 450 students. The average classroom size is 25 students. The student population is primarily Caucasian. 29% of students receive free and reduced lunch. 58% of the teachers at Crestview have a masters degree. The average number of years of experience in teaching is 10 years.

The goal of the study was to gain a perspective on teachers attitudes on different aspects that may affect their teaching styles.

Question 1: I adhere to the curriculum as outlined by the district and instruct the lessons as defined in the manual.

Answers: 11% responded Always, 78% responded Usually and 11% responded sometimes.

Always: Teachers that answered ALWAYS had an average of 10 years of teaching experience.

Usually: Teachers that answered USUALLY had an average of 11.2 years of teaching experience.

Sometimes: Teachers that answered SOMETIMES had an average of 2 years of teaching experience.

Question 2: It is important to be willing to try new things in my teaching.

Answers: 91% responded Always, 9% responded sometimes.

Always: Teachers that answered ALWAYS had an average of 11.3 years of teaching experience.

Usually: Teachers that answered USUALLY had an average of 12 years of teaching experience.

Question 3: All students are capable of understanding math concepts.

Answers: 30% Always, 50% Usually, 20% Sometimes.

Always: Teachers that answered ALWAYS had an average of 5.5 years of teaching experience.

Usually: Teachers that answered USUALLY had an average of 15 years of teaching experience.

Sometimes: Teachers that answered SOMETIMES had an average of 6 years of teaching experience.

Question 4: All students are capable of understanding science concepts.

Answers: 30% Always, 50% Usually, 20% Sometimes.

Always: Teachers that answered ALWAYS had an average of 5.5 years of teaching experience.

Usually: Teachers that answered USUALLY had an average of 15 years of teaching experience.

Sometimes: Teachers that answered SOMETIMES had an average of 6 years of teaching experience.

Question 5: I ask students to explain their answers.

Answers: 20% Always, 60% Usually, 20% Sometimes.

Always: Teachers that answered ALWAYS had an average of 13 years of teaching experience.

Usually: Teachers that answered USUALLY had an average of 9 years of teaching experience.

Sometimes: Teachers that answered SOMETIMES had an average of 17.5 years of teaching experience.

Question 6: Instructional strategies that I use as a teacher can increase a child's interest in a particular subject.

Answers: 50% Always, 40% Usually, 10% Sometimes

Always: Teachers that answered ALWAYS had an average of 12 years of teaching experience.

Usually: Teachers that answered USUALLY had an average of 10.4 years of teaching experience.

Sometimes: Teachers that answered SOMETIMES had an average of 10 years of teaching experience.

Question 7: When I have a non-English speaking student in my classroom, I look for new ways to communicate with them.

Answers: 60% Always, 30% Usually, 10% Sometimes

Always: Teachers that answered ALWAYS had an average of 13.6 years of teaching experience.

Usually: Teachers that answered USUALLY had an average of 13 years of teaching experience.

Sometimes: Teachers that answered SOMETIMES had an average of 2 years of teaching experience.

Question 8: Parents should be partners with teachers regarding the education of their children:

Answers: 90% Always, 10% Usually.

Always: Teachers that answered ALWAYS had an average of 13.2 years of teaching experience.

Usually: Teachers that answered USUALLY had an average of 2.5 years of teaching experience.

Question 9: Students learn best through textbooks.

Answers: 70% Sometimes, 30% Rarely

Sometimes: Teachers that answered SOMETIMES had an average of 17 years of teaching experience.

Rarely: Teachers that answered RARELY had an average of 10 years of teaching experience.

Question 10: I feel uncomfortable when I encounter students from different cultures or backgrounds than my own.

Answers: 10% Usually, 10% Sometimes, 50% Rarely, 30% Never.

Usually: Teachers that answered USUALLY had an average of 10 years of teaching experience.

Sometimes: Teachers that answered SOMETIMES had an average of 17.5 years of teaching experience.

Rarely: Teachers that answered RARELY had an average of 8 years of teaching experience.

Never: Teachers that answered NEVER had an average of 20 years of teaching experience.

Question 11: I incorporate diverse backgrounds into my classroom library.

Answers: 30% Always, 70% Usually.

Always: Teachers that answered ALWAYS had an average of 16 years of teaching experience.

Usually: Teachers that answered USUALLY had an average of 8.5 years of teaching experience.

Question 12: I review my class each year and intertwine the background of my students into my lessons.

Answers: 40% Always, 40% Usually, 20% Sometimes.

Always: Teachers that answered ALWAYS had an average of 9.3 years of teaching experience.

Usually: Teachers that answered USUALLY had an average of 13 years of teaching experience.

Sometimes: Teachers that answered SOMETIMES had an average of 11 years of teaching experience.

Question 13: I feel better when I learn that my class list includes more boys than girls.

Answers: 10% Sometimes, 50% Rarely, 30% Never.

Sometimes: Teachers that answered SOMETIMES had an average of 8 years of teaching experience.

Rarely: Teachers that answered RARELY had an average of 11.6 years of teaching experience.

Never: Teachers that answered NEVER had an average of 14.5 years of teaching experience.

Question 14: I feel better when I learn that my class list includes more girls than boys

Answers: 10% Always, 20% Usually, 10% Sometimes, 30% Rarely, 20% Never.

Always: Teachers that answered ALWAYS had an average of 2.5 years of teaching experience.

Usually: Teachers that answered USUALLY had an average of 7 years of teaching experience.

Sometimes: Teachers that answered SOMETIMES had an average of 7 years of teaching experience.

Rarely: Teachers that answered RARELY had an average of 15.6 years of teaching experience.

Never: Teachers that answered NEVER had an average of 21 years of teaching experience.

Question 15: Setting individual goals for each student is a yearly focus.

Answers: 50% Always, 30% Usually, 20% Sometimes.

Always: Teachers that answered ALWAYS had an average of 9 years of teaching experience.

Usually: Teachers that answered USUALLY had an average of 17 years of teaching experience.

Sometimes: Teachers that answered SOMETIMES had an average of 12 years of teaching experience.

Question 16: I strive to ensure that I am incorporating the backgrounds of all students into the curriculum.

Answers: 10% Always, 80% Usually, 10% Sometimes.

Always: Teachers that answered ALWAYS had an average of 11 years of teaching experience.

Usually: Teachers that answered USUALLY had an average of 12 years of teaching experience.

Sometimes: Teachers that answered SOMETIMES had an average of 21 years of teaching experience.

Which part of teaching do you enjoy the most?

Working with individual students. (21)

Using creative methods of learning to make knowledge meaningful for the students.
Seeing student growth as a result of great effort and focused learning. (2)

I love watching the kids when they have an “a-ha” moment. At this level they are making connections everyday. It is amazing! (2.5)

The students. (6)

The challenge and helping students progress from their various levels. (8)

The relationships that I create with student. (20)

The interaction between the students and myself. I enjoy the relationships that develop and continue even after the school year ends. (23)

Watching the children’s knowledge grow. (12)

Watching students achieve a task that was hard to reach. (12)

Teaching students new and exciting things. (7)

Which part of teaching do you enjoy the least?

None (21)

Grading. A C can be a great achievement for some students but is viewed as average according to the standard scale. (2)

I wish there were more resources. It is hard to feel like you can't do awesome things because of limits on technology and dollars. (2.5)

Paperwork. (6)

Discipline issues. (8)

The massive amount of preparation time needed to do a good job, and the constant meetings that get in the way of that. (20)

Dealing with students who lack discipline and respect for others. (23)

Difficult parents and staff members. (12)

Individualizing lessons and classroom management for hard students. (12)

Establishing rules and routine. (8)

What preparations do you make as you prepare to instruct a new classroom of learners?

None (21)

Review sound teaching techniques.
Make changes in unsuccessful lessons.
Assess student learning levels.
Build relationships with students early in the year. (2)

I try really hard to clean my slate and adjust my room based on what I learned from the previous group. I go in knowing each group will have different needs. (2.5)

How I'm going to make connections. How I'm going to teach them. What works, what doesn't work from prior years. Speak with their prior years teacher. (6)

Questionnaires. Review Questionnaire. Meeting with the student for individual assessment. (8)

Curriculum preparation. Room set-up. Once students arrive, I try to learn about student's personalities, how they learn best, and what their interests are outside of school. (20)

DRA Testing prior to school starting to see the reading ability of my class. This helps me determine a starting point for my literacy instruction. (23)

Evaluate how I can improve my instructional strategies in all areas to better meet the needs of all my students. (12)

Checking in with prior teachers. Meeting with parents to find out if the students need challenges or any other kind of need. (12)

Too many to list. Review curriculum, set up schedule and routine. Get classroom visually ready. Send post cards to welcome students. Prepare assessments and beginning of the year curriculum/projects. Work with grade level team. Read through child's cum folder. (8)

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